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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out an agenda for higher education that will create a society in which lifetime learning is encouraged, valued, and rewarded. The paper presents five key issues that must be defined in order to achieve these goals: (1) the role of higher education; (2) the role of public policy; (3) how resources and intellectual property are to be managed; (4) how a community of learners can be created and sustained; and (5) strategies for creating institutional change. The principles set forth to guide this agenda include: the value of learning both to society as a whole and the individual, universal equity of access, enhancement of the natural propensity for learning, acknowledgment that a lifetime learning society will be consumer-driven, the importance of arts and cultural studies, the unique commission of public higher education institutions, and the ability to identify learning needs. The paper then lists 16 strategies that would allow colleges and universities to act as catalysts for change. A list of discussion participants and reviewers is appended to the paper. (CH)

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A Learning Society
Creating an America that Encourages Learning Throughout Life

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Donna S. Queeney

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

A Learning Society
Creating an America that Encourages Learning Throughout Life

Higher education must take immediate action to lead our nation in forging a learning society--a society in which seamless learning throughout one's lifetime is encouraged, valued, and rewarded. Such a society is essential to the economic and social health of the nation, critical to the continued success of democracy, and vital for citizens to enjoy full, productive lives. Colleges and universities should have a pivotal and catalytic role in working with a range of partners to develop and enhance a learning society. Should they fail to assume that role, substantially diminished academic programs will result.

To lead the nation in developing and enhancing a learning society, higher education must redefine its function, role, and mission, taking a proactive stand on key questions:

- What is the appropriate role for higher education within a learning society?
- What is the role of public policy in a learning society? What policies and procedures can be established to pay for a learning society?
- In an electronic age, how will resources be licensed and intellectual property be managed so that information is accessible to the broadest possible audience?
- How can a virtual community of learners be created and sustained?
- What strategies can be employed to create institutional change?

Unless colleges and universities marshal and leverage their resources promptly and effectively, their opportunities for leadership and even for meaningful participation are in serious jeopardy. In order to sustain the vital connections between lifelong learning and (1) the research and scholarship on which it is based, (2) community issues, and (3) the economic forces that drive the nation, higher education institutions of quality and foresight must move to define their place in the learning society. To do so, they must:

- concentrate on their strengths
- build coalitions and partnerships with others whose resources, values, and goals complement theirs

Higher education cannot afford to turn its back on this opportunity, to ignore this challenge. Colleges and universities must move forward now with an action agenda, driven by a set of principles central to a learning society.

(White paper prepared for the Kellogg Commission of the National Association of State Colleges and Land Grant Universities.

Principles

Higher education must partner with other providers, including the private sector, to understand and respond to the needs of a broad spectrum of learners. The following principles should guide higher education and its partners in developing an agenda for action:

- Learning has value to all segments of society. In addition to the personal benefits of lifetime learning, large portions of the workforce must continue learning if they are to remain gainfully employed.
- From prekindergarten through retirement, universal equity of access is necessary to correct the growing educational bifurcation of society.
- Individuals' natural propensity for learning should be enhanced by systematically preparing people to be lifelong learners and emphasizing learner-centered learning.
- Lifelong learning should include learning as a team member, complex problem solving, learning how to learn, and taking ownership of learning.
- A learning society is and will be largely consumer-driven. This reality must be balanced with the educational needs of all segments of society.
- Arts and cultural studies have an important place in a learning society.
- A wide range of knowledge providers exist and are needed. However, public higher education institutions have a unique commission to create, integrate, disseminate, and apply knowledge.
- With information doubling every three to five years, lifelong learners will need skills to discriminate and to identify the information that will help them meet their personal and professional needs.

Strategies

Higher education should serve as a catalyst in framing and implementing a learning society, providing leadership and facilitation to activate interested parties in pursuit of their shared goals. The strategies cited below suggest specific steps in an agenda for action that would allow colleges and universities to proactively affect the learning society.

1. Enhance institutional awareness by soliciting information on and listening to societal interests and demands, and by assessing educational needs at a variety of levels.
2. Create mechanisms to involve faculty members as active participants in the discussion at all levels, enhancing their awareness of societal needs and their

role in addressing them. Help faculty members at public institutions interact effectively with the community in meeting the land grant mission and/or the needs of their state.

3. Encourage development of public policy that supports a learning society from prekindergarten through older adulthood. Areas to be addressed include:
   - tax incentives and other strategies to facilitate individuals' educational participation and employers' support of education
   - promotion of access for all segments of the population, without regard to employment status, age, income level, or geographic location
   - development of a technology infrastructure aligned with publicly controlled options

4. Use technology to enhance educational delivery and to reach large cross-sections of society, allowing educational needs to direct the use of technology rather than permitting technology to structure education.

5. Form partnerships, consortia, and coalitions to carry out the national lifelong learning agenda. Outsource activities as appropriate; other educational providers must become partners as well as competitors.

6. Work with a coalition of universities to repackage education to meet consumer demands, creating degrees (e.g., terminal master's degree), alternative credentials (e.g., "master teacher"), and other formats that respond to lifelong learners' needs.

7. Form teams (including colleges and universities, their colleagues and partners, and their customers) to realign institutional priorities (e.g., an appropriate reward structure) in support of a learning society.

8. Allocate resources according to the strategic priorities associated with reaching broader audiences: set expectations, relate them to budget and reward structures, and require demonstration of accountability.

9. Promote faculty and student learning through cooperative ventures with schools, social service agencies, community organizations, and others to carry out research and policy analysis. These endeavors can assist participating institutions in their own self-improvement.

10. Make a commitment to the lifelong learning of graduates at both institutional and system (NASULGC) levels. Encourage each college and university to establish with its entering students a "partnership for life" as the lifelong learning home of its alumni.

11. Make a commitment to the educationally deprived, to address the increasing educational and economic bifurcation of society. Colleges and universities should devise ways of reaching these audiences, including train-the-trainer programs for schools, churches, social service agencies, and other organizations and institutions.

12. Develop innovative programs for funding lifelong learning, such as educational "mortgages".

13. Provide a diversity of formats for education, breaking the mold of semester structures, standardized K through 12 education, and lectures or talking heads.

14. Provide the counseling and other student services necessary to assure that participants receive support for their individualized learning.

15. Involve multiple communities working on real problems in teams of learners with both similar and dissimilar backgrounds, interests, and roles. Recognize the increasing importance of globalization through integration of multiple perspectives.

16. Structure curricula, lifelong learning plans, standards, evaluation processes, and recognition vehicles across universities to serve lifelong learners' needs.

Conclusion

The time to act is now, and action must be decisive if higher education is to be meaningfully engaged in the learning society that is emerging and growing. New paradigms are needed. Creative leadership, bold priorities, innovative use of resources, and extensive piloting of new models are required to take us into the 21st century. The public colleges and universities are uniquely qualified to be catalysts for change, to take the first step in moving the agenda for action ahead.

A Learning Society

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